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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON THE USAID-FUNDED VENEZUELAN ELECTORAL  
OBSERVATION ORGANIZATION "OJO ELECTORAL"

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SUMMARY  
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1. The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) has been working in Venezuela since September 2003, to support the establishment of a domestic electoral observation organization that is widely perceived as credible and impartial by a majority of Venezuelans. This is even more important now than when the effort first started given that the credibility of the Carter Center - and to a lesser extent the OAS - was damaged in the eyes of the Venezuelan opposition as a result of the events surrounding the August 15, 2004, presidential recall referendum. Similarly, those few existing Venezuelan NGOs with the capacity to carry out electoral observation are mistrusted by supporters of the government. There is the clear need for a trusted and capable domestic organization to fill this void. The organization, "Ojo Electoral" (Electoral Eye), is in the process of positioning itself to become that organization - not just for upcoming electoral events, but as a permanent fixture of the Venezuelan electoral landscape. End Summary.

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OJO ELECTORAL OVERVIEW  
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2. In September, 2003, USAID awarded NDI \$770,000 to work with civil society to help ensure the transparency and integrity of electoral processes through domestic observation. This project is being implemented through cooperation with a recently-constituted civil society organization called "Ojo Electoral" which is a consortium of individuals and groups affiliated with both the government and the opposition. The long term goal of this project is to establish a domestic electoral observation organization which is widely perceived as being both credible and politically neutral by a majority of Venezuelans.

3. The board of Ojo Electoral is composed of five individuals: Carlos Genatios - former Chavez government minister, and a Chavez supporter; Eleazar Dias Rangel - the director of the daily Ultimas Noticias which is perceived as left-leaning and pro-Chavez; Jose Virtuoso - a Jesuit who is perceived as politically nonaligned; Ignacio Avalos - columnist for the daily El Nacional - opposition light; and Elias Pino Iturrieta - also a columnist for El Nacional, and a strong opposition supporter.

4. The bulk of the observers come from the Catholic NGO Fe y Alegria (Faith and Joy) which is widely perceived as supportive of the government. Almost all the observers are affiliated with the network of Fe y Alegria schools throughout the country, making them well-positioned geographically to serve as observers where needed.

5. Progress on this project has been much slower than anticipated due to the ongoing attacks of President Chavez on organizations that have received USG support - in addition to regular attacks on the USG itself. This resulted in the initial reluctance of individuals and organizations to be affiliated with this project - and which also resulted in the Ojo board's decision to not accept USG funding, even through NDI, to cover the purchase of equipment and office set-up expenses out of concern that this could potentially compromise the perceived neutrality of the observation effort. (Note: Ojo is, however, willing to accept technical assistance from NDI such as consultation and training, which has comprised the bulk of NDI's assistance to Ojo Electoral.) Prior to the August 15 referendum and the October 31 regional elections, NDI worked with numerous embassies in an attempt to secure non-USG funding for the project, with no success beyond statements of moral support. Several Venezuelan foundations, however, were more accommodatng and provided approximately \$100,000 for offic expenses and the purchase / rental of equipment such as computers and cell phones. Post-referendum NDI reported that local donors are much less enhusiastic about providing financial support to Ojo.

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Ojo Electoral Observation of the Referendum and Regional Elections  
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6. On the evening of August 13, and after a long process of negotiation, the National Electoral Council (CNE), accredited only 195 of the 295 observers that Ojo Electoral needed to carry out their planned observation effort - and which proved statistically impossible to reprogram so as to

ensure the validity of the observation. In response, Ojo decided to use the August 15 referendum as a training exercise - only issuing a press release commenting on the process rather than the results. The primary outcome of this observation exercise, and the ensuing controversy surrounding the results of the referendum, was that the members of Ojo saw first-hand the critical need for Venezuela to have a credible and politically-neutral electoral observation organization. The board of Ojo committed to developing their organization as a permanent electoral fixture.

17. The CNE was more accommodating for the October 31 regional elections, accrediting over 400 Ojo volunteers with sufficient time for Ojo (in collaboration with NDI) to field teams that would produce statistically valid results. (As was the case for the referendum, Ojo was the only domestic observation group to receive credentials from the CNE. Seven states were covered (Zulia, Carabobo, Lara, Merida, Nueva Esparta, Tachira, and Yaracuy) which included the Ojo observers participating in the audits of the results of these states. Members of the Ojo board also gave a joint press conference with members of the CNE. This exercise, in addition to once more bolstering the confidence of Ojo Electoral, again demonstrated the need for Ojo to mobilize additional financial resources in order to facilitate and professionalize their efforts.

#### ----- Moving Forward -----

18. Two NDI electoral consultants spent some days in December with the board of Ojo to work on the strategy for the coming year. A significant development from past visits is that both felt that they are now perceived as trusted members of the team, rather than as outsiders; that the Ojo board strongly appreciates that their support is critical for Ojo's future and institutional development.

19. The Ojo board is now also prepared - with the assistance of NDI - to make a serious effort to engage other governments, in addition to the USG, to mobilize additional resources. In December, Ojo representatives called on representatives of the EU, Canada, the Netherlands (very receptive) and Norway. Ojo is planning additional calls on the Austrians, the British, the Japanese, the Finns, UNDP, and Spain. (Note: This is something that NDI and Ojo had been working on prior to the referendum, but with recent transitions of embassy staffs, and the onward movement of funding cycles, in some cases they are starting from scratch.) At this juncture, even symbolic donations would be useful both for providing political cover as well as priming the pump for other donations.

#### 110. Current Work Plan:

- Observe the parliamentary recall elections scheduled for February.
- Carry out an audit of the Registro Electoral Permanente (REP), possibly starting in April. This will be preceded in February by a visit from Pavel Centeno, the director of FLACSO, a Latin American academic / political research institution located in Guatemala. Centano will be working with Ojo to walk them through a methodology for auditing an electoral registry. Depending on resource availability, the audit may be completed as early as June. The mechanisms for release of the audit results will depend on the results themselves. (Note: Ojo fully appreciates that an audit of the REP could put them in conflict with the CNE - which, on the other hand, would offset any perception that they are becoming too close to the CNE.)
- An April workshop in Caracas with Latin American political specialists - including the participation of Ojo observers from around the country. Topics will include: electoral observation in general, issues related to recent Venezuelan electoral events, electronic voting, experiences with dialogue in highly polarized environments, and experiences of organizations that have come under attack by their governments. In addition to the exchange of technical information, this event is also intended to motivate / encourage members of Ojo, as well as serve as a forum for publicizing the presence and work of Ojo. The embassies of Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Colombia and Chile have all agreed to pay the airfares for individuals from their respective countries (participants to be chosen by the Ojo board). In addition, NDI will finance the participation of specialists from Guatemala, Nicaragua, Peru and a still-to-be-identified country (participants to be chosen by NDI).
- Observe the municipal elections scheduled for July.
- Observe the legislative elections scheduled for later in the year.

111. The cooperative agreement with NDI terminates on June 30, 2005. It is likely that the cooperative agreement will be extended at least through the end of the year.

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